

Dark Secrets

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract And Acknowledgements

Abstract:

I love over-the-top drama. When I was watching the Lifetime Network one afternoon, I had an epiphany, *I could write this*. I could write about mothers leaving their kids to smoke crack. I could write about a young boy going to war and coming back with so many injuries all he could do was sit on the porch and watch life go by. In my creative project, I set out to do just that. First, I chose a theme fit for Lifetime, Dark Secrets. Then, I set out on an adventure to conquer melodrama through poetry and short stories. I wrote 16 poems, 2 fiction pieces, and a creative nonfiction piece. They all explore the dark part of life kept secret. Please read on and enjoy. For a closer look at the technical aspects of the project, also read the analysis of my creative process at the end.

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Thank you, Mom. You've been my strength. Thank you for letting me watch soap operas and too much television and for letting me chase a dream.

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Blackened Cherries

The smell of fruit rotting on the tree
Unpicked
Liver no longer working and the house
Empty
He watches the cherries dropping one by
One
Longing to taste the bitterness left by the
Pit
He filters through magazines sniffing
Perfume
Waiting for the twin with no sibling to
Return
She is already lost in a world
Uncaring
Looking after someone else's needs
Children
He will die like the cherries – unnoticed
Neglected

Secrets Smile

She lingers in the mahogany wood-framed doorway.

She has the feeling someone has been here,
in her personal escape.

A scent of cologne, too faint to be sure,
loiters in the air.

"His."

The stuffed bears stare at her with shiny black eyes and red smiles, keeping the
secret, unblinking.

The towels!

She always hangs them on the back of the door handle.

They are gone now, discarded on the floor, still wet.

She trembles with rage and fear,
both feelings muddled into a gigantic ball of nerves.

She slides toward the pillow
as if to smother the laughing bears.

The shiny pink book with the ballerina slippers
and golden lock lies face up, open.

"No."

Returning Your Call: 911

I heard the sirens, first. They kept getting closer and closer. They seemed to stop right in front of our house. I opened the silky maroon curtains overlooking the blue wood floor of our large front porch out of habit, to make sure they weren't stopping in front of our house. My pace started racing as the ambulance stopped on our side of the one-way road right beside my silver Chevy, parked in the street. *"How am I supposed to leave?"* was the first thought that entered my head.

Then, I remembered. Last week my little brother was playing with the phone at my Nan's house. We were all watching some silly cartoon that Cole wasn't really interested in, because he kept button mashing the phone. We didn't realize that it was actually turned on and calling someone until it rang a few minutes later.

"Hello, this is 911 returning your call...is there a problem?"

"I'm sorry, I think you've got the wrong number," my mom said questioningly into the phone.

"We've received three calls from 457-1312. Are you sure everything is all right?" the operator asked.

My mom thought for a minute, then looked at Cole with a surprised expression.

"My two-year-old son has been playing with the phone. He must have accidentally called 911. I'm sorry. We'll have to keep a better eye on him."

We were all amazed my little brother could mistakenly dial the same number three times. It seemed to be an act of a genius, rather than mere coincidence.

Naturally, when the ambulance stopped in front of our house, I assumed the little mischief-maker was up to no good again. I imagined him hiding in his favorite place, the large cardboard box in the toy room, with the portable phone in his lap happily pushing the green-lighted buttons. I always thought it was funny that in a room full of toys, the one he and Cory liked to play with the most was something we could have picked up from the trash heap.

I walked briskly to the kitchen: "Where are the boys?" I asked urgently.

"They're in their crib. They fell asleep watching *Teletubbies*. Why?"

"There's an ambulance in front of the house."

Mom didn't take the news quite so nonchalantly as I had. She ran to the front door and yanked the handle. The huge oak door didn't even squeak on its hinges, as it was apt to do. She ran out onto the porch. I followed more slowly behind her, because, by that time, I could smell it.

It smelled like a bonfire gone out of control. Earlier that summer, my friend and I had thrown a party at her parents' house, because they were out of town. After consuming a lot of alcohol, we had thought it would be fun to start a small bonfire on the dirt track the bikers used behind her dad's garage. A large amount of wood had already been placed on one of the hills by greasy unseen hands, so all we had to do was light it. I don't even remember who had thrown

the match. I just remember the fire had started small and pretty, but it kept growing until we couldn't stand the heat anymore. We had walked back up to the house about a half-a-mile away. When I had looked out the window, I saw the huge flames licking the sky above the trees in the back. The present smell was more potent than any bonfire.

Now, as we looked across the street, I could see the flames inside the Conrads' house. They were just visible through the front window that looked into the living room. I heard a plethora of sirens. They seemed to be coming from everywhere. A bright, yellow fire truck came rushing down the street, screeching to a halt in front of the dirty brown house. The firemen started piling out, the same men whom I waved to everyday from my car on the way to and from school. Now, their usual jovial faces were transformed into one's of determination. In that moment, I knew.

I'll never forget the millstone of that knowledge. I can't even explain how I knew, but I did.

"She's in the house," I said quietly to my mom.

"What?" she said.

"She's in the house," I repeated with more urgency.

"We don't know that," she said a little too quickly.

I knew. When I looked into her watery, blue eyes, I knew that *she* knew, too. The other neighbors who stood quietly on their porches, staring in horror as

their neighbor's and friend's house continued to burn, knew too. It's as if we shared one state of mind, a dark omniscient consciousness.

Mrs. Conrad drank too much on a regular basis. Her husband said she was often depressed. She didn't usually come out of the house during the day. Her kids were in school and her husband at work. She kept to herself. She wasn't outside yelling at passersby or inside breaking dishes. She was quiet and secluded. She was trapped.

The firemen were yelling – something. I don't remember. It seems like they were saying that someone was inside. Did they?

I saw her sitting on the couch with a cigarette in one hand and a bottle in the other. She was watching soap operas and fell quietly asleep. She dropped the bottle, which clunked muted onto the carpeted floor. Then, the cigarette slipped from her fingers. The fire started small, but it received fuel from the alcohol. I saw all of this in the dark part of my mind. Maybe she didn't fall asleep. She could have passed out.

The police came to calm the horrified crowd that had accumulated.

"We really can't say if anyone was in the house. We can't get a hold of anyone."

My mom responded to this statement by calling dad. "You have to find Jim," she said into the receiver after quickly relaying the past 15 minutes of occurrences to him.

pastoral hand placed on each tiny shoulder. How could they bare the weight? I could see his lips moving silently, praying.

God protects little children, they say. He didn't let them stay home from school that day. Instead, they came home just in time to see a gurney carry out their charred mother in a black bag as Father turned them away. Jim left his truck in the middle of the road, the engine still running, as he galloped toward the smoldering house. The boys ran to him, grabbing a hold of his blackened jeans, their tears mingling with dirt.

The firemen gave the boys a Dalmatian to help pull their red wagon, but the smell of smoke would never come out of the walls of their house.

Heart Shocked

The shadow man with smooth skin and gray hair sits alone
In the back of the bus.

He rides all day and gets out at the same stop

He got on.

He looks out the window and waves to the passers-by,

Smiles at the passengers.

Silently

He weeps for the war, the way young men are asked to die

For no noble cause, only wealth.

He carries a picture of a somber youth in a uniform

Who looks like an unripe vision staring from a time warped mirror, half cracked
with age.

Pirates and Storms

He crouches awake below.

Waves of breath sail from brother soothing the silence.

Hooligans with patches, bandanas, peg legs and parrots perch in the corner of the painted ocean sky stateroom.

Pooh Bear covers his eyes, while Mickey Mouse cowers behind plastic trees near the shoal.

He pinches the covers to his small chin.

His chubby fingers turn white with the anchored grip on his fluffy blue blankie.

The fan squeaks as it oscillates port and starboard —
fueling their sails.

“Abandon Ship!” They cry enthusiastically — eager for the mayhem, tired of dragging.

Tears begin to fall from his wide blue eyes—

“Mommy!” he screams, still asleep.

Suddenly, his eyes burst open as if he’d been Jettisoned and hit polar water.

He knots the comforts of bed and tosses them overboard.

Deserting the maiden voyage for the safety of Mom’s room.

Leaving

She couldn't accept he wanted to leave.
He said he would always
Want her, need her.

She believed his clichés
Like she believed in immortality.
A great concept, but could it really happen?

She cried when he left
As she knew she must,
but she covered it.

She watched sad movies
and pretended she was crying
for them.

She tried to move on.
Leaving her house, her room,
No, her bed.

To shop
Out of town
Where she wouldn't run into him.

Tears kept forming, falling on her black shirt
For no reason
Except he was no longer there.

Orchard Bees

The boys' remote calls howl intoxication.

The still moment stolen in the apple orchard subsides. Red shoes abandoned on porch, evidence of lingering presence, fail to abate screams or help feet fly fast as she propels from a cloud of yellow and black makes brown fury lining for honey-colored head.

Solace slackens with prime prick on shoulder blades bringing raped tears to now hunter green eyes, morphing with emotion – sadness, lust, fear.

Finally, she divulges her position: "Help!"

The soft sounds of sneakered feet approach as she races toward dusty paths to migrant's quarters. Smoke from the bon fire becomes her new refuge, one teeming with boys but free of the vicious bites of bees.

Black Patent Leather Shoes

Kate crosses her legs at church
Because the nuns say it's polite.

She says 10 Hail Mary's everyday
5 Our Father's.

She walks home
With her big brother.

She sits while her mother braids her auburn hair.
2 dark pigtails the boys tug on.

She learns to iron.
Her shirts are pressed every morning.

Kate cried today.
She evoked the ruler's wrath
Because her shoes
Were too shiny
According to Sister
Perdita Mary
And she forgot to
Cross her legs.

Only Your Shadow

Susan is sitting in her bathroom with the wood door closed behind her back. She stares at the plastic swinging door covered with mildew that opens just wide enough for her to get in these days. The fluorescent light above flickers with a buzzing sound that a bee would find annoying. The mats look matted, once pink and fluffy, now looking as if someone had spit in a bag of cotton candy, shook it up, and left the results.

She's sitting on the linoleum floor that must once have been white, but now is composed of cracked yellow tiles. The sound of rain hitting plastic comes from behind the shower door, and she knows that no one can hear her. She sits listening to the water pound the plastic surface of the bathtub as she did when she was younger when thinking about something or someone. She usually has the water on to drown out her emotions or at least the sound of them.

She keeps her emotions locked tightly in this shabby bathroom just as she keeps herself locked inside when she is feeling this way. She looks in the mirror to see herself. A chunky, once natural blonde approaching forty-three with stretch marks looks back at her. However, she still sees the way she looked the day her family photo, which still hangs in the hall, was taken in 1953: young, long blond shining hair, and a radiant smile over a body with no curves. The younger self also used to sit in the bathroom to cover up something, but then it was not her emotions.

As Susan sits, she loses focus on her grubby bathroom and begins to focus on the images in her head, which consist of blurry words fixed on bright white backgrounds. She can't make out the words because of the mist, whether it resides in her mind or in the bathroom, she can't really tell. As she gets closer, the signs are shoved at her blood shot eyes and the voices raise, shouting, "Murderer!"

Susan walks through them, as she must everyday, with her eyes following her white shoes on the dark pavement. However, she sees through the corner of her mind's eye a priest standing behind the few protestors gathered. She can hear him saying, *"You've lost your way, child,"* even though his eyes are blank and his face motionless. His dark hands grasp his worn leather Bible. He seems to know it is too late for her.

She clutches her dark blue gym bag closer to her trembling body, longing to run, yet knowing this is all a dream – one that haunts her even in the light. All she can do is think about that morning so many years ago when she discovered that the sound of the shower could close out the world.

The house Susan grew up in was a conventional house. The upstairs belonged to her and her sister, Jackie. The blue-carpeted stairs led the way to the girls' bedrooms. They had separate ones with a bathroom in the middle. One door led to Susan's green bedroom, and the other led to Jackie's yellow bedroom. Their parents, always sensible, had painted the rooms neutral before the girls were even born.

Susan, the younger sister, always got the shower second. Jackie would insist on leaving the doors to the rooms open, because she didn't want the steam from the shower to frizz her hair. Even though the doors to the bedrooms were both closed, Susan always felt so exposed in the mornings. Two girls sharing a bathroom demanded trouble.

"Why can't you wait until I'm done to do your hair?" Susan screamed over the loud pipes in the blue shower.

"Why must we go over this every morning? I told you, I have to do my hair when it is still wet, so it will have time to dry before school starts. You don't do your hair in the morning, so why don't you just take a shower at night, huh?" Jackie asked snidely in her teenage voice.

Well that is simple, thought Susan. If I took a shower at night, I wouldn't have the pleasure of annoying you.

The constant struggle for power between the two girls always seemed to tilt too much toward Jackie in Susan's opinion. Jackie, older and more mature, at least physically, had been pulling away from her recently. Susan remembered that just last year, Jackie was still eager to bestow wisdom on her. She was still Jackie then, not Jacqueline, as she now insisted Susan call her. Of course, when Susan likewise demanded that she be called by her Christian name instead of Suzy-Q, Jackie had just laughed sardonically.

"You are so sophisticated. Right? Sophisticated Susan!" Jackie had said.

At the beginning of the school year, Jackie started taking showers in the morning instead of a bath at night. Susan, always right behind her sister in every situation, decided that she would also stop taking childish baths. Of course, Susan didn't realize Jackie began taking showers in the morning to cover up the sound of morning sickness.

Furthermore, Susan's hair was still long and took hours to dry while Jackie had recently cut hers in the latest fashion, which Susan would not find out later was to make her face appear thinner even as she continued to gain weight. Susan wasn't allowed to cut her hair yet because her mother had said, "You're too young to get a hair cut like that." To which she had replied wittily, "I'm not a baby, anymore." Of course, her mother had won the argument.

She had thought about just cutting it herself, finally gotten up the nerve, and had the scissors in hand in the bathroom. She raised the long golden lock and began to snip it when she heard rushed footsteps coming toward the door. Jackie was up unusually early for a Saturday. Her sister ran to the toilet and expelled the contents of her slightly rounded stomach. After that, Susan forgot all about cutting her hair and morning showers. It always came back to that morning.

Suddenly the bright youthful memories turned dry and chapped as Susan began to recall the morning that had changed Jackie and herself with the yellow duckies as the only witnesses of the transformation.

Her sister sat on the toilet in the blue bathroom they shared. It was still decorated the way it had been when she was five and her sister seven, with yellow duckies everywhere. The once fluffy yellow towels still had the initials, S.K. and J.K., stitched onto them with royal blue thread. Jackie sat on the toilet in her oversized white nightgown her pale skin only slightly darker than the garment contrasting dramatically to her raven colored hair and dark brown eyes, which were almost black with emotion. Susan could just make out the new bulge beginning to form under all the material in the eyelet lace nightgown.

Susan watched her from the doorway of her room, while still listening sharply for a hint of her mother coming in to help with her hair.

"Are you sick?" Susan asked, hoping the incident was related to the flu but dreading the truth she knew was about to come out. Then, she heard the soft thuds of their mother's footsteps coming toward her room. She shut the door to the bathroom and ran to jump in her bed.

"Hey, honey. What are you still doing in bed? You're not catching Jackie's illness?" mother said.

Oh my God, she already knows, Jackie thought. How come I'm the last to find out?

Mother seeing the confused look on Susan's face said, "Honey, I'm only joking. I doubt that Jackie's laziness is contagious. And I think I hear her in the bathroom anyway. I wonder what she is doing up this early?" she said as she glided toward the door.

"Oh, uh! I think she's not feeling well. Maybe you can fix your special oatmeal. It always makes me feel better," Susan said.

"Sure, honey," Mom said, eager to help. "Tell her I'll bring her some in bed in a few minutes," she said and displayed her dazzling smile.

As her mother walked lightly down the stairs, Susan opened the door just wide enough for her slender body to fit through and shut it. She turned on the water in the shower, then lowered herself to the floor, pulled her legs to her nonexistent chest, and leaned against the cool wood of the door.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. Her sister just raised her face from her knees and looked at Susan. The pain underneath the emptiness frightened her.

"We're going to go out for ice cream, tomorrow," she said. "We'll borrow daddy's car and drive to the city."

Susan didn't understand, then, sitting on the floor watching her terrified sister trying to hold on to what little courage she had left. The next day, she accompanied Jackie to a clinic. She waited in the car fearing what would happen inside.

Nothing horrible happened. Susan was so surprised. She thought for certain that Jackie would come out a changed person because Janet, from Home EC, had told her horror stories of "loose women" and back alley clinics.

Susan remembers how relieved she was that Jackie was fine. She even slipped the remaining bills her boyfriend had given her to "take care of the

problem" into Susan's hand before drifting off into a drug-induced rest. When they got close to town, Susan counted the money and discovered they had enough to see a movie. She took Jackie to the drive-in, so she could rest, and so they wouldn't have to go home just yet.

Susan remembers the closeness of sitting in the car with her sister and forgetting the subtle horror of the afternoon in the lucidity of the film. *She trusted me*, she remembers thinking.

A harsh knock jolts Susan from her old haunts.

"Are you ready for work, Suzy? I can drop you off at the clinic on my way," her husband says. "The kids have already left on the bus."

Susan uses the towel rack to pull herself up from the floor, opens the squeaky door, and turns the water off. She blinks, trying to see through the mist filling the small room, and uses the towel to wipe off the mirror.

"I'm not quite ready, yet. I can take the bus," Susan says with no intention of leaving the bathroom. She could not help her sister that day, because she was scared to go inside. She had gone against her mother's wishes when she took the job at the clinic, but she had done it for Jacqueline. Now, she will not go back to that place of death also for her sister. She won't go back, because of the tear that slipped out of Jackie's eye when she was sleeping as the sun began to set and the movie started. She won't go back, because she doesn't want to see those tears anymore. She has accompanied enough young girls through the scariest moment of their lives to make up for the one she could not.

Bubble Baths

Once warm, comforting
moments of relaxation
after muscle mutilating
Work.

Now foreboding, menacing
mockery of disease
after clothes collapsing
Loss.

Tree Star

Her voice drifts
down
descends on him
as the tree star surfs
upon the unseen wind
whispering
Burning sphere of Light
Pursue it.

He rolls up the leaf
which will always stay green
full of the life
his mother no longer possesses.

He follows the burning sphere of Light
until his legs feel
as if they will break
under the weight of his heart.

But he finds
the place where water
still covers the dirt
and tree stars are everywhere
only to discover
his mother's voice was
Lost in the sea of Remembering
All the sacrificed mothers.

Late to Class

Sally came to class late
The door creaked
Everyone looked, no doubt
Sally's face reddened
With each deafening step

She crept closer to the wall
To her seat in the corner
Jimmy decided to take charge

He stuck out his white-
Shoed, large foot
Sally did not see
And fell, hitting her
Head on the heater
Along the white wall

The red in her face
Lashed out the small dent
In the side of her head
It splashed on the wall
And Jimmy's white shoes.

Irish clergy after the Famine

Fiona's family told her the dowry was gone,
Meaning no husband.

She went to the convent with one suitcase
And a Bible her mother gave her
Right before she left
As if it would help her understand
Her fate, which was worse than spinsterhood.

She knelt and gave herself to the church,
Not to God.
She prayed every day,
Sometimes even silently with determination.

Because the sisters thought she was devout,
They sent her to Africa to save the heathens.
She gave up Ireland as she had given her youth.

Here, her life changed.

She met a man, a priest,
Who also seemed to have a quiet devotion,
Which arose from a fateful day when his father
Told him that his brother would inherit
All the land.

He didn't believe in vows
And had a shallow passion for this
Calm woman in black and white,
Who seemed so numb to the world in her
Hushed solitude, washing the stone floors of the
Small haphazard church.

Here, they discovered what vows
Would never provide.

Letting Up

She crammed the memories
Into his metal box
Fireproof
She fastened it with a shiny
Silver combination lock
Took it to the attic

In the wall where
Water seeped in
Like blood or tears
Constantly under the surface

Concern filtering when
Discovered, disclosed,
Closed, shut away
And forgotten
Like forgetting to beat
Your heart

Screaming Thoughts

I used to hang out in cemeteries. I used to lay on the graves in the wet grass and be alone. I used to look up into the sky and see only blue and white mingling in a swirl. I used to laugh.

I was in the hospital getting a blood test, just a blood test, when I met him, a sweet boy who graced my life for a mere moment, but left an impression like a thumb print on a softened plum. He was gorgeous, of course, long black hair, soft tan skin, and black eyes, very tall and thin. I saw him and knew I wanted to belong to him.

It wasn't just the way he looked, but also the aura around him, dark and mysterious. I've always been attracted to that type. I started talking to him, I don't even remember what I said, something about his piercings. He had so many. I remember the look of shock on his face, as if he hadn't even realized anyone else was there.

You see, he wasn't sick then. I mean, he didn't look sick. We began talking; he was very friendly once I broke through the ice. He liked how I looked too. My hair was darker then on top with bleached white hair underneath the black layer. I still wore all black then with large tattoos up and down my arms. I had one piercing right above my lip on the right side, because Marilyn Monroe is my favorite actress.

He said he was there for blood tests, too. You know how hospitals take forever to do anything? We ended up talking for about an hour. I gave him my phone number and told him to call me. He didn't for a couple of days, but I finally heard from him. He said he thought I was beautiful and smart, and he wanted to see me.

On our first date, he took me to see a black and white film. It was some kind of film noir. The beautiful woman with dark hair fell in love with the wrong man, and when her lover found out she was caught in the middle. In the imminent struggle with a gun at the end, she was killed. It was beautifully tragic, so I appreciated it. I felt like he could be the one for me, the dark prince meant to devour me whole. I accepted the thought when he took me to an all night diner afterwards.

As we were sitting there, not holding hands yet but with them just inches apart surrounding our individual coffee cups, I kept watching his lips. Do you ever do that? Just watch someone's lips move? It is so sensuous and completely distracting when you are trying to listen to someone you are incredibly attracted to. I think I missed it the first time he said it, because I was so enthralled with the way he moved his mouth.

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?" I said.

"Did you catch any of that?" he said.

"Some of it," I said twirling my hair, that stupid thing girls do when they like someone.

"Well, it's really hard for me to tell people this, but I know it's the only fair thing to do in my situation."

What? I must have missed something big. Someone in his situation? What the hell does that mean? And then he told me.

"I have AIDS."

AIDS? What the fuck? I finally meet the perfect man. The one I can see myself being buried next to, and he's not gay for once. Well, maybe he's not gay. How much

do I really know about him anyway? Maybe he is gay and just wants a hag. Well, I'm not fat enough to be a hag. In fact, I'm not fat at all. Oh shit, I've missed the last 2 minutes of him talking. No, he's quit talking and is just staring at me with those eyes, those black hole eyes, once you are in there is no way out.

"I said, do you want me to take you home?" he asked.

"Uh...no. You really threw me. I never expected to hear that. If you are having a bad time you can just tell me. And if you are gay and don't want to hurt my feelings all you have to do is say, seriously. I'm not that fragile. Just tell me the truth." I said, realizing this was getting way to deep for a first date. No wonder he was making shit up; I must seem like a complete insane psycho bitch. I'm fucking blowing this completely.

"I'm not lying and I'm not gay. I just have AIDS." That was all he said about it. Obviously, I didn't feel comfortable prying right then. Not after the interrogation I had just put him through.

After a few minutes of silence, he started to laugh. "You know, that's the first time anyone has ever accused me of lying about it. I guess I'd have a hard time believing something like that, too."

And that was it. I was hooked. We stayed there all night. Maybe I should have stopped seeing him then, but I just couldn't. You see, there was something about him that I couldn't help but want to be near him regardless of the consequences, of the constant pain. Even towards the end when he tried to push me away, I couldn't leave. I

think I loved him from the moment he gave me that shy smile. "You're the only one who gets to see it," he used to say.

One day, he cut his finger doing something around the house, trying to be helpful. I was washing the dishes that had once again piled up and heard him swear. Then I heard the bathroom door slam shut. When I asked if I could help him, he shouted through the fake wooden door to get away. He said it was dangerous. I tried the door, but he had locked it. I could hear his sobs interspersed with the jiggling of the handle.

When I got tired of staring at the painted grain of the door, I started banging. He refused to let me in, sobbing that I didn't understand. It was the first real fight we had.

The real danger had happened a year ago when I fell completely in love with him. I knew I would love him for the rest of my life regardless of the length of his. I also knew I would stay with him until he left me. The danger was being so close to him everyday and not being able to be with him.

He just kept telling me to get away, and he could deal with everything. I wanted to scream so many times so he'd notice me and realize I was there. I was hurting, too. I had to do SOMETHING. I couldn't just stay there and watch him suffer.

But, I always had to watch. He was so strong. I think his strength scared me the most, because I wasn't prepared when he broke down.

I came home from work early. I thought I forgot to leave out the food for the cats and Gabe was supposed to be at the hospital all day undergoing one of his treatments. The sun was shining through the French doors onto the onyx table in the dining area. He just sat there staring at air. He didn't even realize I was home.

Finally, he looked at me out of his haze.

"What are you doing, baby?" I asked.

"Thinking..."

"Why?"

He laughed haughtily at our usual banter. "I was just thinking about how much I love you." To which I responded with the customary, "Ahhh..."

"No," he said. "I love you so damn much that it physically hurts. I want to live. Do you know how fucking long it's been since I actually wanted to live? I don't wake up wishing my place in this world was filled with a black hole?"

See, I made him want to live, but I also made him hurt because of the hope, the desire for something other than the inevitable. He said it was easier to be alone, isolated. Those dark words scared me, because I thought he would shut me out completely. He looked so torn that day; I thought he would leave in the night without a word or a whisper.

But he didn't; instead, he continued. "This is the first time since I found out I was sick that I actually feel something, some semblance of being alive. Like I'm not just a walking corpse, but an actual person with emotions and feelings like everybody fucking else. I'm not afraid to die; you know I'm not fucking afraid. It's you."

With the words, which had been tormenting him finally out, he collapsed on the table. He had, after all, missed his treatment. He said he wasn't afraid to die, and I believed him. He was, however, devastated by the reality of leaving me behind. In that moment between the last uttered words and the sound of the gavel coming down in finality, which his head made upon hitting the table, I knew I'd stay with him until the end. It was my verdict.

We rented an apartment overlooking the beach in Maine, because he had visited there as a child and wanted to feel his mother's presence again. He was feeling much better. He was never really physically sick, but he'd get into moods where it was scary to be around him. I couldn't imagine where he would go sometimes in his mind when he looked at the air like it contained the secrets of the universe, but I knew it was a dark and gloomy place. You know you really love someone when you want to be in that dark place a mind goes when it can't deal with the horrible reality its faced with. But he'd always come out of it when I'd try to make him tell me what he was thinking. "Me thinking? Why?"

He'd sit in our big, green velvet chair and stare out the window but not really look at anything. I knew he was there in that world of despair. Do you ever have that feeling of gloominess that takes over when you know you have no control over your life? His dark eyes would turn to coal, and his face would harden. He wouldn't hear anything except his screaming thoughts. I know they were screaming because sometimes when he was asleep, he would scream those thoughts. When I'd wake him, he wouldn't remember anything or at least he said he didn't.

He always tried to protect me from the bad things. I never really knew how sick he was until he went into the hospital.

The doctors were so surprised he had been living with so much pain without medication. He simply said he didn't want to live life in a haze. He wanted to be coherent for his remaining time.

His mother had died from cancer. They gave her so much medicine for her pain she didn't recognize anyone, not even her husband, months before she died. His father would cry each time he left her room openly in front of Gabe. George wouldn't come to the hospital now, because he said he wouldn't watch the last piece of her die.

"I want to be able to look into your beautiful face and remember all the moments," Gabe said only two days before his last. He was strong enough for the both of us, for everyone.

You know how some people have a hope they will miraculously find a cure before death comes? He never had that false hope. It was as if he knew he was going to die, and he never pretended anything else. I think he couldn't handle the hoping. He would always say things like, "after I'm gone," or "don't be sad when..." He was always more worried about me than him, which may have been a comfort, because he must have been scared.

When he died, I died, too. I looked into the eyes that were no longer magnets binding me to him. I held his hand, which no longer gripped mine with the force of an angel battling his eternal fight. When he took that last gasp of air, it was as if the other

half of my soul had been ripped away. It wasn't sudden. I mean I always knew it would happen, but it didn't make it easier. Just because you are prepared for something does not make it hurt less.

Now, I visit his grave. I don't walk among the random graves dancing. I don't sit on top of gravestones and sing or read poetry. I'm not coolly morbid. I can't be anymore. I always told him I'd pick the most beautiful cemetery, because I had staked them all out in my youth. When I lay on his grave, I only feel the wet grass beneath me, and I talk to him like we used to.

Angel with Scarred Wings

Jason likes bald-headed girls
Who wear combat boots
And shirts with swastikas.
They are smutty and dirty.
They speak with accents,
Foul language
Coming out of foul mouths
Stinking from rotting teeth and cigarettes.
He sees beauty in taboo.

He also throws knives
At the wall for fun.
And cuts his arms, chest
To get rid of the pain
Left by nothing seen.
He works at a family store
Though he understands no family.

He told me never to do
These things
And above all
Never put needles in
My arms.

Drink

The taste of ambrosia
Leaks from her tongue
To her throat
Lingering on the pendulum
Keeping count.

It doesn't cost much
Just all the tears
For those who can't
Taste it because
Their tongues have
Already been sundered.

Food for Osiris
So that she could
Taste immortality
From a bottle
In the shape of a
Shell.

While they stare
Unfit to speak
She drinks.
Continues to
Drink.

Planetarium

The orange butterfly still in her soot hair,
its lifeless wings fluttering in the wind,
lost in time unmoving.

The planetarium stood replete with life,
but she needed to run
from the lost feelings.

She persisted to run as the sun became lost
in a fleshy sky disguising the sound of chirpy birds
as the faces of sunflowers turned towards bed.

Saturn's lecture burned her brain
as stars twinkling fiercely in her eyes
with tears that would not fall or evaporate.

Cancer

It eats away at you
Consuming body, living cells
When it's through
it starts on your soul
Dimming the lights
that used to reside just
behind your eyes
When it's through
it leaks out of you
onto the floor
The machines send out
alarms that no one answers
Even the night light
flickers out
Then it crawls up her leg
She breathes it in
and it no longer eats the flesh
only the part of her
no one sees
She loses weight for no
medical reason
She yells, "I have it too"
although the doctors guarantee
that it's not contagious
They don't know the
transformation has taken place
and it continues to destroy
until all the night lights
are unplugged
left
lying on the floor
of the hallway
When it's through

Analysis of Creative Project

I began my academic career at Ball State as an English Major. I have known since the second grade that I wanted to be a writer. In the fifth grade, I had my work published for the first time in a book of children's poems. Of course, being published only encouraged my passion for the world of creativity opened by literature. Like most people, I had a difficult childhood filled with traumatic events. My escape became reading and writing. I wanted to share in the world by becoming a part of it and creating it myself.

My passion inevitably led me to a college classroom where people with the same passion surrounded me. Instead of being intimidated, I was overjoyed. I now had a new family who shared the same drive I did. Unfortunately, reality set in when my mom suggested I add a second major to my repertoire. At first, I was indignant. I would not sell out. Eventually, I caved (more to her nagging than from a fear of failure). I added a Magazine Journalism Major as well. However, creative writing continues to be my first choice in life.

Poems

Although I have taken creative writing courses, I have not taken one solely dedicated to poetry. I took a songwriting class, which was closely related to poetry. We studied song lyrics as well as poetry. I have written poems in my journals for as long as I can remember, but I guess you could say I have not been classically trained. Therefore, I was nervous about including poetry in my creative thesis but challenged as well. I knew if Dr. Koontz, who is a working poet and my advisor, would approve of my poems then I was set. Thankfully, he did approve.

The First Step

I went through all my journals and chose poems or ideas for poems with the theme Dark Secrets, which I had chosen before I started writing a word. You would be surprised how many ideas I had already written in old journals. I tend to dwell on the morbid and dark aspects of life.

The tough part of dealing with old work was that I had gotten so much better by the time I read it that I was not sure if it was salvageable.

I indiscriminately typed all the poetry dealing with my theme and saved it in my Honors Creative Project folder. I found it was very important and productive to go through this stage. Typing work on a processor gave it a new life, which was more academic and professional. It also allowed me to see the flaws and enabled me to easily fix them. I found that keeping multiple versions of my work was also helpful. After multiple revisions, the main essence of the work could have been lost, and I needed the original to turn back to in order to salvage it.

The Second Step

After I had typed everything in my computer, I started cutting things out. Some people have trouble letting go of their work, but I do not. I save everything, so even though something does not show up in this final project, it does not mean that it is lost forever. Most likely, it will show up in a later work where it will have more impact. I threw out anything that was overtly cliché, which was a large section of the work.

Next, I chose poems that had a resonating theme. They were not perfect. In fact, they needed much work to get to the point of finality. I chose poems that were workable. I knew that I would not have an enormous amount of time to devote to the project, and I wanted work that was already on the road to being useful and finished. I found out that I must prioritize the work. The poems, I knew, would need the most time devoted to them, because I had not written any for academia in quite some time. I started the whole process very early in the semester.

The Third Step

Once I had a working body of poems, I began to creatively edit them. I had the idea for the poems clearly in mind and on paper. However, I needed to tweak them. I had learned at BSU that poetry demanded the right wording. In prose, I could get away with the almost right word but not in poetry. Therefore, I separated each poem into a separate document, so I would not be overwhelmed with my task.

I worked on each poem individually. I went line by line, reading for rhythm and word usage. I wanted the lines to flow. I did not want to be confined by any certain style, so I used my own. I felt comfortable with the language, so rhythm seemed to flow from my fingertips. Word usage was another story.

The hardest thing about writing poetry was finding the perfect word. I used the dictionary and thesaurus quite frequently. I referenced and cross-referenced all the words until I found the one that was just right. I felt like Goldilocks in the bear's house more than once. When I could not find the perfect word, I would make a word. However, the work was worth it, because I finally achieved the finished product.

The Finished Product

I was apprehensive about writing about my life and using the first person. Too often readers mistake the first person point of view as that of the author. I often use the first person as a character, which is separate from me. I also did not want to seem conceited, because I really do not think my life is the most interesting thing in the world. I also knew the reader would not want to know every aspect of my life. Therefore, many of my poems became fiction loosely based on a truth in my life or a life that I knew.

"Angel with Scarred Wings"

The purpose of the poem was to show a small glimpse into his life. I really liked the descriptive quality that showed what he was about rather than merely telling. The imagist poets really influenced a lot of my work. Strong images let the reader come to conclusions on his/her own.

"Black Patent Leather Shoes"

Dr. Jennings planted the idea for this poem in African American Studies. She said girls in her youth would be admonished if their shoes were too shiny, because the boys would be able to see their panties in the reflection. I decided to tell a story in this poem. I created a character and simply told her story.

“Blackened Cherries”

This poem started as a block of words. I put the word that needed the most emphasis on its own line to give the poem impact. If the reader read just the words that were offset, he/she would discover a separate poem. The long lines gave clarification. I told only a portion of the story, which followed the form.

“Bubble Baths”

I used the cause and effect method on “Bubble Baths.” I also used alliteration, because it made the thoughts flow together better. All the words in the first stanza were set to contrast with the ones in the second stanza to demonstrate a great change in the character, who was not named, through the simple act of taking a bath.

“Cancer”

This was my favorite poem, and it was also the one that came the easiest. It was almost exactly the same as the rough draft. I used the title so I would not have to explain what I was talking about in the poem. I wrote it almost as a song, because it had the recurring line, “when it’s through.” I used through to mean two different things. One, it described the cancer moving through the body and destroying. Two, I used it to mean finality, when the cancer is done with the body it has destroyed. Again, I used many images to evoke feelings. I only used punctuation on the quote, because I wanted the reader to experience it as a whole.

“Drink”

Although I did not write any science fiction or fantasy for the longer pieces, I could not escape it in my poetry. Actually, I really enjoyed both science fiction and fantasy. I would love to create a world separate from my own. “Drink” was a small piece of fantasy. I chose to use 5 lines in the first and last stanzas and 6 in the middle two. The lines are similar in length. I attempted to capture a horrific scene in detail.

“Heart Shocked”

I used the title to play off the term shell-shocked. My character was a veteran. I wanted to create a sympathetic character who has been disturbed by war. I set up a long descriptive and

emotional line, next to a short purely descriptive, action line to create friction. I wanted to represent the emotional war going on within the character.

"Irish clergy after the Famine"

This poem was inspired by a lecture Lauren Onky gave in the Honors 390 course in the Fall 2003. I created a story from a common situation that took place in Ireland after the famine. Because of the narrative nature of the poem, I wanted to show a change in the character. The short lines were the summaries of the story, which were too long to be disclosed in a poem. The longer stanzas were the short explanations.

"Late to Class"

I created a scene that happened in college often, someone coming to class late. However, I twisted it into something more bizarre. I used the colors red and white, because they symbolize anger and calm. I also used them to represent death and life. I only used one period, because the poem was a whole scene.

"Leaving"

This poem was my take on the cliché break-up. I tried to explore the inner workings of the aftermath of someone leaving. I chose three line stanzas, because it was the most concise. I wanted to make the poem choppy like thoughts would be after a traumatizing event.

"Letting Up"

The poem was broken into three stanzas with 6,4,6 line count. I chose to create a scene-driven piece, but interspersed it with a stream-of-consciousness thought process through the character.

"Orchard Bees"

The only technical aspect I put into the poem intentionally was the alliteration. I found words that displayed the meaning I wanted but also started with the same letter to give it a rushed feeling.

“Pirates and Storms”

This poem started out very bland. I decided to take sailing terms and work them into the poem to create a terrifying scene in a child’s bedroom. I used terms that could be taken either as jargon or their dictionary meaning.

“Planetarium”

The technical aspect I struggled with in this poem was the description of the character with the butterfly in her hair. I had an image in my head, and it took a lot of searching to fit the description into the poem. I did so by really honing in on the exact word to use, so I could cut down on descriptors.

“Secrets Smile”

I hinged the poem on the three main thoughts of the character, “his,” “the towels,” and “no.” The thoughts or words of a character are very powerful and I wanted to create a scene where they would have a great deal of impact with minimal utterance.

“Tree Star”

I used four stanzas with 8,4,4,8 lines in each. They represent different scenes in a journey. The first and the last are the most important, so I made them longer. The even number of lines gave a complete feeling, which mimicked the burning sphere in the poem. I used inanimate objects as characters as an experiment.

Prose

I left the prose for last on my priority list. I did this for several reasons. First, I had been writing stories or essays for all of my academic years, so I had it down to an art. Second, I write stories in my head first, so when they are created on paper, I’m already on my second draft. I do not have to do as much revising once I have been thinking about a story for awhile.

I also already had a base for the stories included. I had written two drafts for a class and never used them, so I went back and revised them. The third story, I had an idea for in a journal and had written a few scenes. Unfortunately, they were filled with clichés and abstract thoughts.

I had to work on it the most. However, since I had the foundation for the story, the rest was just adding the flesh to the bones.

“Screaming Thoughts”

I found the idea for the story in a very old journal. However, I still found it to be an interesting idea. I wanted to deal with death in my project, and I thought it would be interesting to create a character who was going to die and capture his feelings about the death before it actually happened. Therefore, I created a love interest for the main character who had AIDS.

The reason I found so many clichés in the rough draft was because the idea was cliché. I’m sure I’ve seen at least one made-for-TV movie about it. Therefore, the challenge was creating a story that would be surprising. I found the best way to deal with the problem was to write thoughts, dialogue, and philosophy because they would change with each person or character.

As I have mentioned before, I was apprehensive about using the first person when I was not the main character. However, I made the exception with this story, because it demanded to be told that way. Also, I wanted the character to address the reader directly, because it would draw them into the story more. I wanted the character to tell the story herself and not have it filtered through a third party. I wanted it to be raw with emotion, because death is an unfiltered and serious subject.

In the rough draft, I did not have any physical descriptions of the characters. I learned in Dr. Dimoplon’s class that the reader needs to be able to picture the character in his/her mind. She also said the description should come very early in the story in a lecture in her English 287 class in the Fall 2003. Therefore, I described both characters’ physical attributes on the first page. I tried to work it in with the flow of the story, so it would not be intrusive like descriptions usually are.

At the beginning, I did not have any dialogue between the characters. The most difficult part of a story was the dialogue, because I had to capture the way the character would talk. Of course, the characters do not exist in reality, so I had to show the way they sounded in my head

on paper. The main character was easier than Gabe. I thought of him as a quiet character, but he was put in a remarkable situation. Therefore, I made his speaking sparse but full of impact.

Last, the scenes were all out of order in my first drafts. I was not sure about how to show the passing of time without making the story too long or drawn out. I chose to use asterisks to break up a few of the scenes that would not be easily transitional. I used them sparingly, because they sometimes pull the reader back into reality. Then, it is more difficult to push them back into the story. Dr. Sumner said in a lecture for Journalism 427 in the Spring semester 2004 that if you break the narrative, you really have to start over again with the next section. However, I thought it worked because I did not break the whole story up that way. I only broke the sections up that needed it to make sense.

"Only Your Shadow"

I began this story in Dr. Dimoplou's 287 class, but tossed it aside to write solely about the past experience of the main character, Susan. I came back to this version of the story, because I had more to say about Susan. The story I turned in for class became about the relationship between the sisters and lost the struggle within Susan's head. I thought Susan's personal struggle with the issue of abortion was also important. Therefore, I chose to resurrect the first version and work from that.

I chose to use in-depth description, not only to show the setting but also to show the character through her surroundings. I then used a flashback method, because I wanted to show the event that led Susan to the point in her life when she was having a crisis of conscience in the present. The flashback was only important as it applied to the current circumstance. I used foreshadowing and author intrusion to clearly state that Susan's sister was pregnant.

The last paragraph showed the change in Susan. At first, she wanted to help other girls like her sister, but she realized at the end that she could not help them hurt themselves anymore for the same reason she had started.

“Returning Your Call: 911”

I also began this story in Dr. Dimoplon’s class. It started as a flash fiction piece. Although I really liked that harsh form, I felt the day deserved more space. I used the first person, because I had witnessed the event. Therefore, the piece became creative non-fiction.

I kept the stream-of-consciousness method, because it tied everything together and prepared the reader for what was to come. Therefore, the whole piece was not a mass of tragedy. I wanted to show the humanity behind the tragic event.

I changed the name of the family and main characters, because I wanted to protect their identity.

The only other technical aspect of the story of importance was the last line. I kept the line I used in the flash fiction, because it was dramatic. It also showed a glimpse into the life of the family after the death of their mother. I wanted to leave the ending open, but show the immensity of the pain the death caused without going into detail.